Madi Egan

Wray

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Mo Chroí

I woke up for what seemed like the thousandth time with cold, leather bound paper on my chest.

“Fiona, dear. Fiona...” Daddy’s hand rested warm on my shoulder, and my eyes opened slowly. His dark hair was slightly tussled, presumably due to the brief sleep from which he had awoken, but his celadon eyes looked less at ease than usual. I wrapped my pea coat tighter around my stomach and squinted slightly into the misty, starry night.

We had been at sea for just a few days, but my spot on the second class promenade near the stern of *Titanic* already felt like home. “Fiona, I need you to go back to the room. Do you understand?”

“No. Brady’s picture isn’t finished.” The objection rose before I could quell it, but Daddy’s reaction was not frustration but concern.

“I’m sure it’s lovely as it is. Find your Mum. It’s very important.” I had already resolved to finish the picture I was drawing for my brother Brady’s birthday, but I nodded in false agreement. The picture had to be completed before morning, and I couldn’t draw in the room because Brady would see it. It would only take a few minutes longer.

“Thank you.” He hesitated briefly. “I’m off to the engine room. I love you, darlin’.”

Cupped in the hands of the lifeboats shielding the effect of the wind as the boat sped on, I felt safe and continued the drawing. I could feel the night getting colder, closing the ship in an icy sheath. The view of Queenstown had long since vanished, replaced by the first glance of open ocean the beautiful vessel had ever seen.

I could remember the stern rising high above my head in the streets of my hometown, Belfast. For nearly two years, workers framed the famous *Titanic* with incredible amounts of steel, creating an unequalled masterpiece. She left Belfast in late May of last year to the cheers of 100,000 proud onlookers, including my mum and dad, younger brothers, and myself, and reappeared in Queenstown three days ago, on April 11th.

My family was more connected with the *Titanic* than others who rode on the ship. My father served as the assistant electrician and had helped to oversee the process of building the boat. We were invited on the maiden voyage as a grand celebration, and so Daddy could help make sure everything was in working order. The date of departure was set, and he enthused about the trip, describing the adventures the ship would hold for us.

Tonight, though, the light freckles of enthusiasm had left his eyes. Something more somber had taken their place, but it didn’t strike me as catastrophic. Resigned, maybe, or tired. Attributed, probably, to the fact that he had to go to the engine room at midnight to help with some trivial problem that didn’t actually require his help.

I sat up quickly to kiss him on the cheek before he walked away, his swift legs carrying him with all the determination in the world toward his home, his element.

As I lay under the misty stars and listened to the water wash against the side of the boat, I thought about him and me. Our relationship was unique and carefree. He was young at heart, and I an old soul. We met perfectly in the middle and had an unparalleled friendship.

When I was young, I would read late into the night, and he would always say he could only keep the lights on so long, since he was our resident electrician. I knew he had nothing to do with keeping the lights on in our house, but without fail he would come in and say, “Mo chroí,” *My heart. “*I only have so much light to give you. Sleep now. The words will be here in the morning.” I would smile, and kiss him on the cheek, close my journal, close my eyes.

I resumed my drawing but again fell asleep. When I awoke, there was a splotch of ink bleeding sticky on the page and covering the bow of the ship. I gasped, knowing the picture was ruined beyond repair. I would have to restart.

My disappointment was replaced quickly by confusion as I realized that footfalls on the deck in front of me, constant and quick, had been the interruption to my sleep. People were filing out of the entrance rapidly, moving for the bow. They were wearing life vests and holding valuables. I jolted from my seat and fought against the current of people moving toward me.

Somewhere along the way, a man handed me a life vest, and I knew something bad had happened. People around me spoke in urgent tones, relaying messages of the ship’s state. I kept moving deeper into the ship to find my mother and brothers, hearing snippets of fact bounce from person to person. Mostly, I understood that the ship had hit, or rather sideswiped, an iceberg.

I descended six decks and sprinted along the nearly empty hall, shouting the entire way and hoping unreasonably that Mum would hear me. I reached our cabin and threw open the door. It was empty. I didn’t want to believe Brady and Ian and Mum would have already left, but they had. I had been told over and over that if I ever found myself lost or without Mum or Daddy, I should stay exactly where they had last seen me. Daddy had told me to come back to the room, and for all I knew that was exactly where they expected me to be. So I waited.

I sank to the boy’s bed, the blankets still formed to their small bodies but already cold. I rolled on my side and saw Brady’s model boat next to the bed he shared with Ian, and I could picture the struggle occurring moments before as Mum grasped his hand and pulled him away, fighting, from his most prized possession. A shroud of tidy weaving, the blanket was no help in emptying my body of the unmistakable chill that had begun to settle. It wasn’t cold enough in our room for the goose bumps to feel welcome on my skin, yet they resided.

  The clock read 1:25, a beacon of order amongst the chaos that hung in the room and on the deck. I had already waited in the room for 15 minutes. The running steps outside the room had stopped, indicating the absolute vacancy of the floor. I swung the lifejacket over my shoulders and left the room. My shoulders tightened and my stomach began its slow rise into my throat, and I realized my mother would not return. My feet glanced off the ground, and the echoes of my steps bounced around my ears, the absence of anyone chilling me further.

A dull roar of panic on the deck soon replaced the quiet surrounding the stairs, and many people pushed me as I fought my way toward the stern, where lifeboats were already being lowered. Around me, the world seemed to be a different place. I could find nothing to connect to other than the light coming from the captain’s quarters, symbolizing the presence of my father, still working in the boiler room to keep the lights on as people on the deck struggled equally to find their way off the sinking vessel. I didn’t follow my impulse to run down to the engine rooms in the “Tank Top,” the frequently mentioned lowest level of the ship and the location of the majority of his work.

His stubbly face was present in my mind as I remembered the peace the first page always brought. Penned in script, it read:

*Fiona Adelaide Kelly,*

*We hope this journal will hear the thoughts we know swirl around that lovely head of yours. We’re so proud of you, your ability to understand so much and be so young and vibrant. Our adoration for you spans so much further than simply these pages, but we hope that each time you open this book, you’ll think of us and remember that we will love you always.*

*Yours,*

*Mum and Dad*

A swelling feeling of need filled me as I read those words. I pushed violently through the crowd, not out of malice but of desperation for my mother. She would know how to react to this situation. The warm colors of the deck radiated nearly extinguished heat, the last hint of the spring day passed, but as I looked out over the side of the ship, I could see lifeboats already floating like candles on the icy water. Their tiny lanterns illuminated only slivers of faces and dashes of color far below the yellow pine of the deck. No more than a fleeting fleck of light, like a shard of glass, I saw familiar flaming orange on the otherwise black sea.

Mum.

I had no doubt my mother had left the ship without me, maybe believing I was with my father, safely off the boat.

I was suddenly aware of the tilt of the boat toward the bow. The unevenness of the deck brought higher the lump in my throat, and I swallowed hard and blinked to banish the tears from my cheeks. Far above me, sparks erupted from a flare, triggering screaming and increasing terror.

A stout woman grasped the rail of the boat beside me and rested her hand on my arm. “Honey, you need to get in a life boat. This ship is going down, and it’ll take you with it if you don’t leave now.” Her blunt words did nothing to stir me from the stupor that had fallen over my thoughts. My mother had abandoned me, and I was watching her sail farther and farther as the seconds passed. The decision to get in a lifeboat, though, was no longer mine. The woman shook my hands from the rail and drug me well into the crowd before I regained my voice.

“Please... let me swim to my mum. She’s not too far out. I can make it, I promise.” The woman gave me a concerned look and held my hand tighter.

“Dear, the water is 31 degrees. Even the best swimmer would drown.” I began to quiver as I realized she was not going to let me leave her side until I was in a life raft. We made our way to the starboard side of the boat. Every so often, the woman would squeeze my hand and mutter something about everything being just fine. She swung me into the lifeboat with a swift motion, shocking me into semi consciousness. I sat on my hands in the boat as it swung precariously over the water, partially to keep them warm but mostly to ensure that I didn’t take up more room than I needed to, or worse, try to move away from the motherly figure, the stout woman, who had temporarily and generously adopted me. The boat was full of mostly women and children, the unwritten law of the ocean being followed as we filed in. Other passengers who were desperate to board the boats shouted at us, but our raft was lowered swiftly to a call of “Lifeboat 11- 1:45.”

I didn’t want to be in that boat. I wanted to find Mum and have her hold me and squeeze the cold from my bones. I let my hands move freely, finding the smooth wood of the side of the raft.We were halfway down when I jumped.

The wind whisked my hair high over my head, and I heard the kind woman scream from the lifeboat just before I hit the water. My coat instantly felt heavy against my body, but my life vest held me afloat. I gasped for air as the icy waves flowed over and over my legs, arms, hands, stomach. I swam quickly, or as quickly as I could, so the lifeboat could not pluck me from the water. The light from *Titanic* was still glinting off the water, but other than the small lanterns in each boat, that was the only light in view. The moon was absent from the ebony sky, but I could see out over the water the flame of hair that I needed. She was far away, but not so far that I couldn’t swim to her. She appeared to be looking back toward the boat, straining for a glimpse of something.

I recognized, after a moment, that the water was not the only thing weighing my coat down. I frantically reached into my pocket and pulled the journal out, hoping to salvage the words I so treasured before they were washed away by the cruel salty solution that was already draining the feeling from my fingers. In some miracle, the water had only dampened on the outside corners of the pages. The ink on the first page was only slightly smudged, and the scrawled penmanship loaned energy to me I had felt leave long ago. I swam for twenty minutes, maybe longer. I turned around, exhausted, and bobbed in the water. In all my efforts, the boat was still close enough that the radiant gleam coming from nearly every light in every cabin was upon my face and the band could be heard faintly playing.

The stern of the ship had risen high in the air and the concentration of people was heavy toward the back. There were at least a thousand bodies still on board, no lifeboats left to save them. Some jumped, their bodies falling quickly toward the water. Frantic and terrified screams traveled out to me, and I wanted to return their anguish. I could no longer swim, the ocean having seized nearly all the feeling from my entire body. I fought hard to keep my journal out of the water, but soon it drooped to just in front of my face, resting on the surface of what I knew would be my grave. It fell open slowly to the last page. With the light still coming from the boat, I read:

*Mo chroí, I only have so much light to give you. Sleep now. I will be with you in the morning.*

The words were a new addition, I realized, scribbled frantically by my father as he rushed toward his death, pausing only to give me a last dedication of love. Tears climbed the outsides of my eyes, spilling over only briefly and burning a few trails down my face, touching the freezing water only after a long trek down my face, over my trembling lips.

I looked up to see the bow submerging entirely in the water, the waves lapping the deck on which I had stood just an hour before. Most of the back of the boat was completely out of the water. It took me back to the days in Belfast where I would near the worksite and watch thousands of men working diligently, pounding in rivets and smoothing steel around the metal cages that acted as a mold. A monster in size and strength, *Titanic* was the pride of the world, and at this moment, it was sinking in the darkest part of the night in the middle of the ocean. Water flowed over the bow, over and over taunting the wood of the deck and finally stealing the wheelhouse from its perch above the water. As if showing the sorrow of the ship, the lights flickered and went out.

The cold that seized my chest could have been the icy water rushing through my nose and mouth, every pore engulfed in a terrible chill, but it was not. I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, if the lights had gone, so had they on my father’s life. Floating in the water, I could see a fleck of the boat against the dark sky and the few stars that showed. Like fireworks, sparks randomly shot into the sky from the smokestacks. The bow continued to sink, the stern to rise. Moments after the lights went out, the middle of the ship bucked, and the beauty broke completely in two. The bow dropped beneath the surface quickly, and as the small wave produced swept toward me, I watched the stern rotate slightly in the water, standing straight up now, and swirl swiftly downward as well.

Resigned, I let my arm, journal in hand, rest at my side. I could almost feel the pages bleeding the words that I had written, my life seeping into the ocean. I bobbed as the wave from the stern lifted and dropped me. Before the swell had completely let me back down, my eyes closed, and I allowed the water to finally take me, sinking as far as my vest would let me. The leather slipped from my fingers as the water took what remained of the feeling in my body.

Attribution of Research

1. Bromer, Rick. "Crewman Describes Wreck of the Titanic." *Old News*. March 1992: 1-3. *SIRS Researcher.* Web. 20 Feb 2011.

* No jolt according to wireless communication lineman.
* Ship began to tilt forward.
* Band continued to play as the ship went down.
* Sideswept iceberg.
* Sparks and smoke continued to come from the funnels.

2. *Irish Sayings*. eTeanga. Web. 10 Mar. 2011.

* Mo chroí means my heart.

*3. Secrets of the Titanic*. Dir. Bob Ballard. National Geographic, 1986. Youtube. *YouTube.com*. Web. 10 Feb. 2011.

* The ship broke in half as it sank.

*4.* "Sinking of the Titanic." *UPI's 20th Century Top Stories*. 16 Apr 1912: n.p. *SIRS Researcher.* Web. 20 Feb 2011.

* Night was extremely cold.
* Water filled the bow.
* The sea filled with lifeboats as the Carpathia approached (as the ship was going down).
* Life boats filled mostly with women and children.

5. *Titanic-Titanic.com.* Web. 18 Feb. 2011.

* William Kelly was the Assistant Electrician on the Boat.
* Lifeboat 11 was lowered at 1:45.

6. "Titanic." *Discovery Channel*. Discovery Communications, LLC. Web. 27 Feb. 2011.

* There were four lifeboats on each side of the second class promenade.
* The second class promenade was toward the stern of the boat.
* The deck was made of yellow pine wood.
* The assistant electrician’s quarters were on the F-Deck.
* The F-Deck was 6 levels down from the boat deck itself.
* The boiler rooms were located in the Tank Top.

7. “Titanic Lifeboats Project.” *The Dweephor Photo Archives.* Web. 6 Mar. 2011.

* Odd numbered lifeboats were on the starboard side of the boat.

8. "Titanic." *National Museums Northern Ireland*. Web. 11 Feb. 2011.

* Built in Belfast, Ireland
* Took nearly 2 years to build.
* 100,000 people watched the launch.
* The boat was launched from Belfast on May 31, 1911.
* Titanic arrived in Queenstown, Ireland on April 11, 1912.
* Titanic hit an iceberg at 11:40 pm (before midnight).
* Ship was going 20 knots when it hit the iceberg.

9. “Titanic- The Legend Below.” *Library.Thinkquest.org.* ThinkQuest. 5 Mar. 2011.

* People moved toward the stern to save themselves.
* Stern lifted 40 feet out of the water.
* People began to panic when flares were released.

10. "WOMEN REVEALED AS HEROINES BY WRECK; Mrs. J.J. Brown of Denver Tells Story of Her Seven Hours in Lifeboat." *The New York Times* 20 Apr. 1912. *The New York Times*. Web. 21 Feb. 2011.

* The lights stayed on for a majority of the sinking.
* The sea was calm and hazy.
* Some lifeboats went far, while others stayed closer to the ship.
* Many people were shouting as the ship went down, and after it sank.
* The stern twisted in the air as it sank.
* Huge wave swept out over the ocean as the boat went down.

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